

Being A Community
Acts 2:42-47
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Here's news: we're getting older. Not just us, but our denomination as a whole. A few years ago, our denomination decided to respond to the decreasing rate of participation and attendance in its churches. So our General Minister and President at the time cast what we called the 20/20 Vision. The goal was to start 1000 new churches by the year 2020 with the hope of revitalizing our denomination and continue to spread the Good News. We're ahead of schedule. Since 2001 we've started 533 new churches, including several in the Chicago area.

Starting a new church is not easy; in fact, it may be one of the hardest challenges in ministry. My friend David Shirey and his family are doing a new church start in the Phoenix area, and I've learned from him how tough it has been to start a church. Of course, this past winter, starting a church in Phoenix was sounding more and more appealing, but he assures me it's hard to start a new church, even in that kind of weather. To build a church from scratch can be a daunting task.

That's why this passage today is so informative. What we have here is the original new church start. These five passages lay out for us the framework of how the first church got its start. Now, of course, at the time the people didn't know they were starting a church. They thought they were simply continuing the practices of the Jewish religious heritage, with the added benefit of the Spirit of Jesus Christ to lead them. It wouldn't be until about 70 years after this that the church would break off from the synagogue and the true understanding of Christianity would begin to form.

This passage is not only a model for how to start a church, but for how to grow a church. A few people in our congregation are doing some work in the area of evangelism, and you'll be hearing more about that soon. The purpose of the project is simply to learn more about how we can tell our faith story for the purpose of bringing more people closer to God through our church. So if we believe it's important to share the good news of Jesus and grow the church, what can we learn about that from the first church?

First, it's important to note when this story takes place in the larger narrative. It comes right after the rush of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit was poured out on the disciples and there were 3,000 converts in one day. I've heard of revivals with similar outcomes, and I've talked to people who had such whirlwind conversions at church camp or a tent meeting.

The challenge with such phenomena is sustainability. How do you reproduce that experience? We had a very special worship service last week. That's not because of anything Tim or I did; it was the work of God's Spirit. The sun was shining through the windows, the music was phenomenal, we had two families come forward to join the church, Jesus came down and sang a solo. OK, that didn't happen, but it would have fit right in! There was this amazing spirit permeating our worship.

As people were leaving, one worshipper said to me, "What a service! Now, how can we bottle this spirit and use it each week?" That's a great question, and if I knew the answer, we'd be building a bigger sanctuary. But I'm not sure that's our goal. There are going to be some Sundays that are Spirit-filled, and some that feel more routine. But we

are called to be the church in both instances. The early church didn't seek to reproduce the Pentecost experience the next week; they moved right into the activities that would sustain them as a community over the long haul.

What were those activities? Notice the first sentence: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer." Right away we're given this four-fold model of what it means to be a community together. Growing together through learning, spending time together through fellowship, worshipping together with communion, and praying together. All of these are important to a growing church.

But there's something there that's even more important. Did you hear the first few words? "They devoted themselves." In those days, the church's existence was in constant danger. At any time the Romans could break in and put a halt to these gatherings. In fact, early Christians met in the underground catacombs to avoid being detected. The existence of the church depended upon the devotion of each and every member.

We have it much different today. The church is well established; we don't have to meet underground or hide from the authorities. We know that if we're gone for a week or a month, the church will still be there and somebody will make sure the heat gets turned on and the bills get paid and everything runs smoothly. Does this knowledge produce in us a certain comfort level that works against our devotion?

For the early church, their community of faith wasn't a hobby or an escape or something to do from time to time. They didn't decide to participate if nothing better was going on. They realized that devotion to Jesus Christ meant a fundamentally different way of living and thinking in this world. They devoted themselves. In a growing church, people are devoted to following Christ over and above everything else.

There's another part of this passage that I've always found interesting. That's the concept of the early church having everything in common, selling everything they had and distributing it to those in need. That really goes against our modern understanding of our basic sense of self-worth. For our first four years of marriage, Leigh and I lived in apartments. It wasn't until we moved here to Illinois that we bought our first house. That one transaction fundamentally change who we were. We were homeowners, for better or for worse. We could say, "This is our house." We had ownership of the place, we could paint the walls whatever color we wanted, we could hang sports posters on all the walls – still being negotiated, by the way.

When I lived in Indiana, I used to golf at a course that was right next to a farm. I got the impression the farmer wasn't too happy about this, because posted along the fence line separating the course from the farm was a series of signs that simply said, "Private Property" and then showed a picture of a shotgun. Now that's a clear message. I can't tell you how many golf balls I hit across that fence line, but I can tell you how many of them I retrieved. Zero! That farmer stated in no uncertain terms that was his land.

But the early church had no concept of such possessiveness. Nothing was his or hers; everything was ours. And that reflects the truth that everything is really God's. We don't own anything, in the ultimate sense. So if it's not mine, it becomes a lot easier to share what I have. For the early church, this may have been a matter of survival. They had to share their possession as a way of helping the community make it from day to day.

What that implies for me is the necessity of a long-term commitment to the community of faith. It's one thing to drop a \$20 in the offering plate; it's quite another to

commit to sharing what you have with others. Such a commitment helps to grow a church that people want to be part of, because it's a place where they can experience the essence of community.

For the early church, part of this community was demonstrated when they "broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts." I like that. The early church ate a lot! We've already got that aspect of a growing church down pat. But they didn't just break bread together; they did it joyfully. They had fun. They enjoyed each other's company. If someone asks you about what this church is like, how would you answer? What qualities would you lift up? And would you answer with a glad and sincere heart? If not, Tim and I and the leaders of this church need to know that, because we want this church to model the first church in its spirit and devotion.

So let's see if we've got this right. According to this passage, a growing church is one where everyone has a place; a growing church is one that seeks to make worship a part of its everyday life; and a growing church is driven by service to others.

You know, that reminds me of another thing I read recently. "We are called to welcome people into a loving and caring church family, to equip people with a Christ-centered faith that works in real life, and to share God's love for us through compassionate service to others. We are called to be Community Christian Church."

That's who we are called to be. If we strive to fulfill that mission, will we grow? The funny thing is, that's not up to us. Notice who did the growing in the Acts community: "the Lord added to their number daily."

So what's our role? It's in v. 42: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." They devoted themselves. They devoted themselves to welcoming others. They devoted themselves to growing their faith. They devoted themselves to serving others. They devoted themselves to Jesus Christ. What's our role in growing this church? It takes each one of us. It takes you and me. It takes a devotion, a commitment, to carrying out our mission. No one is a spare part. Everyone has a part to play and a gift to share. Imagine what would happen if every one of us devoted ourselves to our mission. Imagine how many lives we could change through Christ. I wonder how many? "And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."